

Part Two

Disappearance and Removal

The Lost Children of Latvia: Deportees and Postmemory in Dzintra Geka's *The Children of Siberia*

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In August and September 1987 demonstrations in Riga, Latvia, and in the other Baltic states, Estonia and Lithuania, openly challenged Soviet rule by recalling the 1918 declaration of independence and protesting the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact that brought the Soviets back into the Baltic in 1940. In 1988, there were public commemorations of the forced removals of Latvians from Riga to Siberia in 1941 and 1949. These events marked the emergence of a confident and resurgent Latvian National Independence Movement.² It was in this post-Soviet climate of historical recuperation that the lost children of Latvia appeared as figures of the nation's origin. Here, we discuss the complex issue of how childhood memory is reconfigured as national memory, and then placed on an international stage to compete with multiple sites and experiences of human trauma for visibility and condolence.

Deportations

The Soviet deportations of Latvian citizens from Latvia took place in two waves. The first occurred on the night of 14 June 1941. Among this group were 2,400 children under the age of ten. Families were targeted if they had members who held positions of power in the independent Latvian government (deemed a fascist puppet organization by the Soviet Union), who were fighting for the Home Guard or who were otherwise prominent in the economic or cultural sectors. The families were taken away in cattle cars, usually with no warning. The men were separated into different cattle cars and transported to Gulags or labour

camps. The women and children, or at least those who survived the journey, were taken to relocation sites in the Siberian wilderness. They were often dumped in settlements where there was no existing shelter or food supply. Many died from the cold, famine and disease; others were shot.³

The second wave of mass deportations occurred on 25 March 1949. Targeted on this occasion were landowning farming families who were resisting the collectivization of the farms. This group was considered dangerous, as it embodied Latvia's agrarian tradition – a powerful signifier of the nation's independence. In this second wave, 42,133 people were deported. Among them were 10,990 children under the age of sixteen, some of whom were taken directly from their classrooms to the trains. Overall, 73 per cent of the deportees were women and children. The focus on children and women underpins Latvian claims that this was a genocidal act of social destruction, albeit one focused on a certain class grouping. The deportees were transported to the same range of camps and settlements as those who had been taken in 1941, although many were allowed to return after the death of Stalin. After their homecoming, however, they continued to suffer persecution in Latvia, as they were now viewed as 'unreliables' by the Latvian Soviet Government.⁴ Survivors have described how they felt excluded by Latvians who had remained and who had either benefited from the redistribution of property, or who simply found the returnees too Russian for comfort.

Documentaries

In 2001 an archival televisual project called *Sibīrijas Bērni/The Children of Siberia* (2001–15) was initiated by Dzintra Geka. The films (sixteen to date) are ideologically aligned to the Latvian government's aims and objectives and are part of a nationally funded project to research and describe the Latvian experience of the twentieth century.⁵ Geka's documentaries have thus been made in a wider context of a nationwide narrative of collective victimhood, intended for Latvians at home and in the diaspora. This narrative, it must be said, has been questioned and challenged, both inside and outside Latvia.⁶ The Latvian sensitivity to a perceived lack of international acknowledgement of their losses has prompted historical and political debates among scholars and in the media; and it may well be the main reason why public funding has been made available for such an extended film project. It also explains why Geka's intervention has

to be understood as a response to national trauma. Nonetheless, our assessment is that, in Geka's contribution to these debates, images of child victims are deployed specifically to *avoid* discussion of more confronting contexts of collaboration, complicity and competition in recent accounts of mid-century European genocide, murder and war. Less controversially, children are deployed to create a simple equation between innocence and victimhood, one that circumvents the difficult contemplation of the historical conditions of the European theatre of war.⁷

Geka has now made sixteen one-hour films, each of which deals with aspects of deportation, arrival and re-settlement during the late 1930s and 1940s, but most consistently with the deportations of 14 June 1941. Geka's films detail these events and explore their continuing impact on survivors and, by implication, their impact on Latvia as a nation. They have been screened on Latvian television, usually on the anniversary of 14 June. Many of them focus on child deportees. When adults feature, their main identity is as *relatives of children* – as mothers, fathers or grandparents. Their position within the family is emphasized over their political, economic or historical role at the time.

Memory and postmemory

Using a term coined by Baltic-based, German social theorist Eva-Clarita Onken,⁸ we suggest that Dzintra Geka has positioned herself as a 'memory actor' in her attempt to disseminate her vision of Latvia's inter-generational national identity. Onken divides memory actors into four categories, each characterized by a particular type of political consciousness: recognition, representation, participation and complicity. These types, or stages, may or may not be developmental, but are most likely to be circumstantial. The fourth, complicity, refers to those who are politically engaged at a high level, quite probably politicians or those with comparable influence. Geka works at the third stage: that is, *participation*. Her films have received public funding for political reasons and their aim is to influence the formation and maintenance of national memory in a certain way. Geka draws on her own family history to fuel the passion in her films. At the same time, she is working with people at the first and second stages of memory action: the victims themselves and those who bring them into a collective group in order to understand (or *recognize*) and express (or *represent*) their continuing sense of loss.

It might be said that Geka is herself also working at the second stage of action – representing, and so managing – the personal tragedy of her own father's forced exile. Geka did not share that exile, but it has undoubtedly shaped her relationship to both Latvia and her understanding of European history. To explain: Geka was born in 1950 between two periods during which her father was deported to Siberia. He was then exiled in perpetuity and Geka did not meet him again until she turned sixteen and made a first pilgrimage to Siberia to track him down.⁹ That pilgrimage is echoed in the many visits she has made since as a filmmaker in the company of other Latvians, both those who were deported as children and those whose parents were deported when young themselves. Geka's film project has been both the prompt for these returns to the site of the trauma and their record.

Onken describes this type of secondary memory and active memorializing as *memory consciousness*, suggesting that those who produce cultural or political objects from such consciousness are 'active agent(s) of a particular social memory'. Marianne Hirsch, the European-American theorist of the Holocaust, family portraits and visual elicitation, has written a body of work on the concept of *postmemory*, beginning with her intervention in the debate about Art Spiegelmann's *Maus* in the 1990s.¹⁰ Spiegelmann used the graphic novel form to investigate and recount the story of his father's journey through the camps. Hirsch (writing with Leo Spitzer) argued that such intense experiences of trauma are passed to a second and third generation, sometimes to the point of excluding or undermining the value of current apparently non-traumatic life histories. Hirsch's work encompasses the spatial as well as temporal disjunctures that the murder and dispersal of an entire continent of European Jewry occasioned. Indeed, in later work Hirsch has traced narratives of return in which diasporic survivors revisit Europe with their children to encounter loss through material traces and records.¹¹ Whereas Onken provides categories of memory agency, Hirsch offers a more complex understanding of the prompts and drivers that underlie the power of memory in individual lives and through social political action.

In Geka's work we recognize an embedded notion of children inheriting the remembered pain of parents and grandparents, as well as suffering the actual disadvantage and psychosocial injuries of a generational assault, their removal from the homeland. Although Geka's strategy may be open to criticism, especially for the visual claims she makes for equivalence between the Holocaust and other

world genocidal events (which we discuss below), the strength of her work lies in the way that she indicates the common ground across many sites of intense or protracted trauma worldwide. Of particular significance here is the way that, in her films, the figure of the child is crucial to these expressions of inherited trauma and political avoidance.

Our approach to the questions raised by Geka's work is influenced by Michael Rothberg's studies of multidirectional memory and his groundbreaking critique of the binary responses evident in many historical accounts of the Holocaust and other genocidal events. Although Rothberg does not eschew comparison per se, he argues against a competitive approach to genocide history (meaning those that compete with the Holocaust itself), while also cautioning against an exceptionalist account of the Holocaust. His point is not that the extermination of European Jewry was to be in any way normalized or compared easily with other degenerate horrors committed at other times and in other places. Rather, it is that violence is constitutive of other violence and cannot therefore be described without attention to the conditions of its emergence. For Rothberg, then, colonial history readies the colonizer for violence nearer to home, and political exclusions at home allow the colonizer to behave ruthlessly with the tacit support of 'the people' when abroad. The reduction of Jewish prisoners in the camp system to *bare life*, 'those who might be killed but not sacrificed',¹² was not equivalent to all other forms of genocide. However, nor was it wholly unique, as violence and dehumanization condition perpetrators and systems to more violence and less humanity, and drive systems and people closer to *bare life*.

Geka's films do acknowledge to some degree the conditions of the removals, albeit in an emotional register that is most legible for fellow Latvians. There is, for instance, a great deal of music on her soundtracks, which layer the sound of Latvian identity onto shots of the Siberian landscape. Her stories of forced removal include the experiences of those adults who lost jobs, professional status and land to both Russian occupiers and to other Latvians, through a process of socially and politically inspired redistribution. Geka, then, represents a generation, or some section of that generation, which insists that the removals of the 1940s should carry the heavy symbolic weight of remembering all economic, social and political slights of the period. In this way of thinking, those who were children at the time of their deportation are metonymic of 'Latvianness' itself. As such, these selected childhoods carry forward the momentum of the 1988 bid

for independence, but – and herein lies a problem – sustained victimhood and innocence thereby become the premise of ongoing national legitimacy.

Rothberg's intervention about the problems associated with invoking the Holocaust in the study of other cases of genocide alerts us to three matters essential to reading Geka's lost children. First, Geka visually cites another genocide through her cinematic references to *Shoah* (Lanzmann, 1985).¹³ Second, she does so without discussing the relevant pan-European events that were more or less concurrent with the events she records and commemorates. So, although Jewish deportees are mentioned, the murder of over 35,000 Jews in Latvia, in the period from the deportations in June 1941 until 1943, is not. Geka fails to acknowledge that the adult deportees were necessarily innocent of those killings, given their absence or their extreme youth, whereas some of the adult Latvians who remained did collaborate with the Nazi occupiers. Third, Geka tells much of her story not only through the lens of survivors' childhood memory, but also through the *postmemory* of people who are descended from deportees. In *Shoah*, by contrast, Claude Lanzmann only worked through testimony of survivors (and perpetrators and bystanders), and refused to countenance photographic evidence in his work. Geka's approach draws to some extent on a multidirectional sensibility in her use of the *Shoah* imagery, for example, but it also contains elements of historical obfuscation and competition. It is relevant that Geka worked on the aftermath of the Lanzmann project through Steven Spielberg's *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History*.¹⁴ Mimicry is an historical act and, as such, one that has ethical implications for disclosure, and for situating difference and divergence from the original text. Lanzmann specifically used train tracks still in place in the 1970s during his shooting, instead of photographic evidence, made mainly by perpetrators, of the trains and tracks as they were in 1941–5 (Figure 4.2). Geka borrows that imagery but overlays it with close-up photographs of children, which invite collective emotional identification on the part of Latvian viewers who will recognize types, dress codes and national or even family facial similarities. One interviewee in our research commented on the number of twins featured, as something she felt was peculiar to Riga (Figure 4.1). Apparently, Latvians have a high proportion of twins in the population.¹⁵ Geka also superimposes names of children, thus directly addressing the family memories of many Latvia viewers. There is a question here about what is being covered up as well as what is revealed in Geka's suture of a trope of exile and murder with specific names and pictures of the Latvian victims.¹⁶



Figure 4.1 *The Children of Siberia*, 2001.¹⁷



Figure 4.2 *Shoah* (Lanzmann, 1985).¹⁸

Latvia

The Soviet occupation interrupted a brief period of Latvian independence (1918–40) at a time when the young and very small nation was beginning to imagine its psychological contours and to create systems of government that could supersede earlier German and Russian influence.¹⁹ The impact of occupation was critical, happening as it did at a moment of collective identity formation. More controversially, the occupation followed a wartime period in which Latvian and German relations were relatively friendly, not least given the

despair caused to the elites by the Soviet deportations. The Latvian Home Guard, for example, had active connections with National Socialism, a relationship that was at its most explicit among the political elites after the German occupation in July 1941 and which was exacerbated by forced conscription into the *Waffen SS* in 1943–4 following the collapse of the Russian campaign.²⁰ In his recent history of the Baltic, Michael North makes a direct connection between the 1941 deportations and the response to German forces the following month. Given that 15,400 people were ‘dragged off’ during the night of 14 June alone (out of a total of approximately 35,000 Latvians deported), North comments that ‘it is perhaps understandable that *Wehrmacht* soldiers would have been greeted as liberators when they marched into Riga on July 1.’²¹

The current Latvian government hotly disputes any systematic connection between the Latvian Legion, which was affiliated to the *Waffen SS*, and war crimes committed on Latvian soil. Be that as it may, they do admit that individuals who may have joined the legion did bear responsibility for the annihilation of the Jewish population and the destruction of the Riga Ghetto.²² Indeed, by 1943, Geka’s father was himself a member of the legion.

The culture of denial is widespread, however. Russia is also loath to admit culpability in relation to the deportations, and the violence inflicted by Russian troops on previous satellite populations. Western European nations are almost entirely ignorant of the panoply of events and in any case see little reason to concern themselves with others’ wartime histories. Latvians experience this silence as an international refusal to acknowledge their national status in any meaningful way and, in reaction; they claim genocide against the Soviet occupiers.

How then, might we read these counterfactual and conflicting versions of a deportation as a genocidal event? The centrality of childhood testimony and postmemory for Geka is important. She presents the deportees as essentially innocent: not perpetrators, landowners or class criminals, but children, mothers and fathers. Thus, they are collectively de-politicized, de-historicized and permanently infantilized into an argument for continuing generational sympathy and honour. And, thus, the larger conditions of violence that spawned such tragedies are eliminated from the national record. The image in Figure 4.3 is taken from a website that seeks to maintain Jewish memory in the Baltic. Presumably taken by a perpetrator, the photograph shows Jewish women and children targeted for execution in Latvia. The youth of some of the people in the group appear very different from the wide-eyed portraits of children in happier



Figure 4.3 Anonymous photographer (assumed perpetrator image), 1941.²³

times that feature in Geka's films. These young women, pictured at the moment of attack, are far more difficult to read. Are they posing or are they captured by the violence of an aggressive gaze? And do we have any right to guess whether their looks back indicate defiance or knowledge of their imminent murder?

Hirsch's insight is invaluable here. She reads the images of child victims – whether a smiling Anne Frank or perpetrator images of a child with his hands up in the Warsaw Ghetto, or of a little girl cowering behind a small group of semi-clad women in a Latvian massacre – as vulnerable to misreading and projection, 'children invite multiple projections and identifications. Their photographic images, especially when cropped and decontextualized, elicit an affiliative as well as a protective spectatorial look marked by these investments, a look that promotes forgetting, even denial.'²⁴

The child in Figure 4.3 is contextualized only by her re-appearance on a website that 'defends history' against what the website owners see as Baltic revisionism. We do not know whether this image has been cropped. We can only assume that it matches testimony elsewhere that women were instructed to strip before being shot. We infer that these women, in underclothes, outside, with armed men in the background, and piles of used clothes (or possibly bodies, it is impossible to see), are indeed about to be massacred. We guess that the youngest is faced by a hostile photographer, because she will not look at us. She is perhaps shamed, and probably terrified. The children in Geka's films, by contrast, look directly at the lens. They are generally happy and confident in appearance, facing friendly cameras held by parents and friends. These images present the context of clear eyes and warm clothes – everything that they will likely lose in the wrench of deportation – and an identification with their older selves, or those who remain

to speak about the experience through postmemory. But these family portraits do not reveal the context of Latvia as an actor in a larger staging of conflict and choice. All we can see is that which Susan Sontag and others have noted: that every photograph is a premonition of death.

Genocide indicates the intentional destruction of an entire people, defined by ethnicity, an intention that is perhaps of a different order of criminality to selective removal and abandonment and murderous neglect. Nonetheless, there are those who define genocide as a social practice of mass murder and a technology of power oriented to the destruction and reorganization of a social group. Latvian scholars, including Māra Lazda,²⁵ Mārtiņš Kaprāns²⁶ and Veida Skultans²⁷ argue that both Soviet deportations are central to Latvian national identity as failed attempts to destroy Latvian character.²⁸ Skultans asserts that for Latvians the Soviet deportations have become as central a feature to identity as the Holocaust is, in her view, central to Jewish identity.²⁹ Argentinian writer, Daniel Feierstein has propounded the argument that genocide has its roots in social dislocation but does so not to suggest that *any* form of deportation amounts to genocide. Rather, he is concerned to describe the precise stages of alienation, dehumanization and isolation that precede wholesale slaughter of a population.³⁰ He also notes that a post-genocidal phase is to remember victims as innocent, in the sense that they are not historically situated at the point of slaughter in retrospective accounts. Feierstein is concerned that such de-historicization is counter-productive. It makes it harder to see why groups were targeted, and consequently removes guilt from collaborators, including those passive citizenries which did not resist the process of alienation. (He makes honourable mention of the Danes and the Bulgarians who did resist the deportation of Jewish co-nationals.)³¹ Using Feierstein's position to evaluate Geka's emphasis on children to represent Latvian deportees en bloc, it becomes clear that her move retrospectively describes the deportations and exile as genocide, in no small part because of the youth of many of those removed from the homeland.

Survivors' memoirs were collected after the collapse of the Soviet Union and were used to form a social memory of trauma.³² This in turn led to a construction of a national meta-narrative, the central focus of which were traumatic events of large-scale force and violence.³³ In the 1990s this meta-narrative was key to breaking from the previous conception of Soviet history, and allowed for a new post-Soviet history and identity to form.³⁴ Thus, the Soviet deportations are at once the key to Latvian collective trauma and an affective attractor against which Latvian self-value is measured. The victim identifies with the captor to such an

extent that he or she has a reduced sense of self other than in relation to the trauma of origin. In the narrative of deportation, Latvia cannot exist without a constant memory of the Soviet era. It cannot forget without putting the nation at risk of forgetting why it has to remember. This resonates with Hirsch's argument that postmemory occludes any other way of being in the world.

Children

With these complex interactions in mind, we now look more closely at the formal aspects of these sixteen films, and in particular, the ways in which they make their argument and emotional appeal through the figure of the child.

The framing argument of this book is that cinematic representations of children are often used to create, manage and articulate collective identity by nations in the throes of transition. The child in film may be deployed as representative, generative, nostalgic or – and this is partially what we suggest here – as a form of expressive repression. Geka's process is both a documentation of the traumatic events of the past and a psychological assault on collective memory in the present, through what might be termed as – borrowing from Freud – a constant return to a melancholic history created through childhood trauma. Geka leads a number of actual 'returns' to the Siberian wilderness in an undisclosed echo of her own journey to meet her father when she was sixteen.

The main sequences of the films comprise interviews with elderly Latvians about their childhood deportation experiences. In other sections, returned child deportees, now old, and younger descendants of other deportees travel to Siberia, and elsewhere, in pilgrimages to honour their dead and to revisit the scenes and peoples of their childhoods or those of relatives. During these trips, led by Geka herself and a priest, other Latvians are 'discovered' in Siberia, apparently assimilated into a place that they have inhabited for over half a century and mostly unable to recall the Latvian language. (Some remember songs when prompted.) People are filmed in close-up, medium shot or in small groups of pilgrims. There are occasional shots of other inhabitants of the Russian hinterland. They do not generally have speaking roles. They are figures of desolation that complement Geka's view of the places they inhabit. There are also numerous landscape shots, usually of the Siberian wilderness, or of the sea passage to forsaken island settlements. These function as metaphors for the gulf between the homeland and the places of arrival.

While Geka's work serves a larger national project of mourning and identity-construction, it simultaneously creates an uneasy relationship with its subjects in a quasi-therapeutic scenario of exploring irretrievable loss. The longevity of her project produces an emphatic vision of the long-term aftermath of childhood rupture but it still fails, ultimately, to find a formal aesthetic solution to understanding and moving beyond the deficit model of Latvian identity. In the end, Geka deploys lost childhoods to find Latvia.³⁵ The Latvian sense of abandonment in relation to these traumas is both personal and collective. Personally, most families have a direct link to a deportee. The poignant contrast between the hopeful youth in the old photographs and the tired experience inscribed on the aged faces of interviewees is crucial to the identification demanded of the viewer. Every child is every adult and every deportee is potentially a relative of every Latvian viewer. The viewer is also interpellated into a complaint against larger forces that are not innocent but that claim ignorance. So, we are compelled to share a cycle of childhood trauma, abandonment and frustration. The process places Russia and Western Europe squarely in the roles of the two bad parents. Parents contrive to forget childhood just as the adult-child is striving to remember and shape her version of what happened and who was responsible. The second parent is difficult. Once it was Germany, but now it has become a major force in the even more complex European Union (EU). Although the EU was initially welcomed as an alternative to Soviet communism, now it is unmentionable except within the new pan-European context. The older fascist past, when Germany 'liberated' Latvia from the Soviets, both condemned many Latvians to Soviet deportation, and blinded Western Europeans and Russians to the plight of those deported. The ironies abound. Only children are presumed innocent, as Hirsch might point out, and that is why Geka forces the children in her films onto our attention, simultaneously entrenching the parental relationship to European neighbours and asking for absolute sympathy.

This presumption of childhood innocence, however, is not extended to Russians. The apparent poverty and backwardness of Siberian Russian lives, even today, are conveyed through shots of scruffy Russian children, loafing teenagers, and teenage mums in *Childhood Land of Siberia* (2013) (Figure 4.4).³⁶ This rundown and dysfunctional place – the filmmaker shows us – has learned nothing from the Baltic peoples it robbed of their childhoods, childhoods that matter.

The collective experience of remembering the traumatic event in order to reiterate Latvian identity is achieved through an unwavering address to us: the



Figure 4.4 *Childhood Land of Siberia*, 2013 (Russian Sequence).

viewer as Latvian. Interviews with deportees are re-visited so that their faces become familiar to us, so that they too are our family, so that we, now presumed Latvians, remember that this was our national family ripped apart. The interviews are usually filmed as headshots, with the camera in medium close-up. The interviewees tend to be filmed at home. The cuts between interview segments illustrate the memory under recount: a child's photograph, a beloved father in uniform, the image of a train or a forsaken shore. The interviews with old men and women, remembering fragments of the night that ended childhood, are marked by a signature memory, the last or worst thing they can tell us to sum up the terror that they experienced when they were removed: 'My childhood was very brief', 'You've eaten enough of Latvia's good things', 'He dashed her [my cat] against the wall. Such a gesture! (Figure 4.5).'

Despite the project's apparent intention to honour the dead and articulate the trauma of the survivors, which includes both individuals and the nation itself, there are contradictions in play. For an audience, the continued pain of victims proves and maintains the rights and wrongs of history. Thus, the one-on-one interviews in Latvian homes tend to be psychologically draining for the interviewee and upsetting for the spectator. The close-up is intense and the framing is tight and constrictive. By contrast, the scenes in Siberia, where deportees return either singly or in large groups, are mobile and motivated as the old rediscover childhood spaces, friends and memories.

In *Childhood Land of Siberia* a man stands in the ruins of a wooden house, a house that he and his mother had prepared for construction in the mid-1950s,



Figure 4.5 *Remember or Forget*, 2006.³⁷

but which another family had finished after they repatriated to Latvia in 1956. He is proud of the resourcefulness of his childhood self and the home that they never built. Another man revisits a tiny shack that he shared with seven others when he was a boy. He begins by explaining that they had some rendering, and even a roof space where he and his brother could sleep in the summer months to make more space for the adults and girls below (Figure 4.6). He notes that their conditions were ‘quite good’. But, as he stands and looks, the camera remains obdurate, and his child’s eyes waver. Confronted by the perspective of Geka’s crew, and – prospectively – fellow Latvians watching the film, he revises that proud, long-held opinion. It is a moment of psychological breakthrough, or breakdown, as his memory of sufficiency, surely linked to some pride in his family’s capacity to achieve that status of ‘quite good’, crumbles, along with the achievement of his mother in making that possible. Is such a revelation for good or ill? What will replace the pride he has in his family’s resilience and his mother’s adaptation to changed and changing circumstance? One thinks of camp survivor Charlotte Delbo’s wrenching description of mothers in Auschwitz who could not protect their young: ‘The women hide the children against their bodies.’³⁸ Or look back at the women in Figure 4.3, and that young girl with her face down, sheltering behind an older woman’s back. Would it not be better in this companion tragedy in Siberia to celebrate a woman’s relative opportunity and her appropriate bravery and note that mothers everywhere do what they can do?

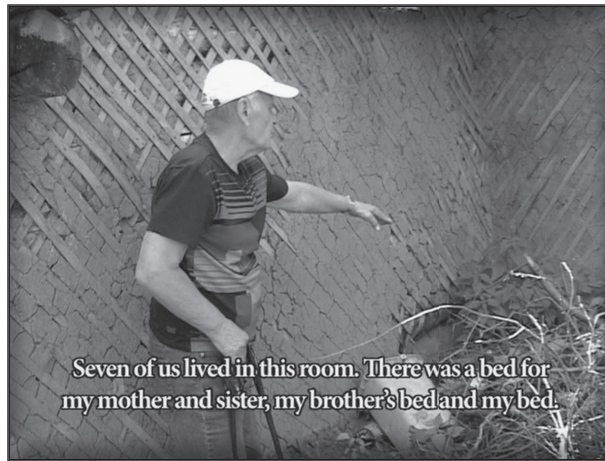


Figure 4.6 *Childhood Land of Siberia*, 2013.

The films thus engage in a morally complex development of identity, in which there is a constant struggle between the need to acknowledge the atrocities of the past without inflicting more pain upon the victims. Not to recognize the injuries of the past is, arguably, to side with the enemy, but to remember oppression is to allow ‘the scar to do the work of the wound.’³⁹ And, in Rothberg’s sphere, to remember tragedy only as horror is to remove one’s story from other stories in which Europeans, including Latvians, played a part.

The 1949 deportations were intended to remove landowners and to punish those who might resist collectivization and further inward migration of Russian peasants. Unsurprisingly, powerful discourses of rural dispossession feed into Latvia’s internal articulations of its identity, at once mutual and dissonant: the rural and the metropolitan, the thriving survivor-nation that is also the ongoing victim of Soviet rule. The sources of the division between country and city were in place in the 1920s but the Soviet and latterly EU experiences reiterated the class differences associated with it. Indeed, this particular division or ‘identity discourse’ encapsulates much of the drama of parental abandonment evidenced in Geka’s films. The Soviet deportations were a violent way of redistributing land, as well as a way of settling of political scores and wartime differences. In the current EU era, the prominence of rural–urban divisions is a function of European economic expansionism. This has led to what another Latvian identity theorist, Karl E. Jirgens, calls a ‘psyche of rupture.’ We see this rupture played out in the traumas registered on the faces of the deportees in Geka’s films, both those

who returned home to ambivalent welcome as Russianized peasants, the rural dregs, and also those who remained and assimilated into Russian peasant life.⁴⁰

As we have suggested, certain key images of the films are indebted to Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, the epic work of memorialization of the genocide committed against European Jews in the same period. Unlike Geka, Lanzmann eschews the testimony of SS footage and post-liberation footage in favour of a juxtaposition of collected witness, and empty shots of landscape and places. He evokes rather than proves horror. Lanzmann felt that to try to bring the past into the present through visual testimony (photographs of children would be in this category) was to betray and banalize the nature of the crimes committed. 'The filmed images from the camps have become cultural icons, their very familiarity a memento of their emptiness,' argues Paula Rabinowitz. 'Rather it is the word "Treblinka" naming a railway depot that holds the powers of horror. ... At this place of death, the train still stops.'⁴¹

Geka attempts to juxtapose memory and place, with photographs, testimony and music, to demonstrate a period of extreme cruelty, abuse and a massive death toll. Whereas Lanzmann assumes that we create our own internal vision of the dead, Geka seeks to bring the dead and the living and the lost back to our notice. She needs their names, their faces and the precise co-ordinates of their journeys to be seen and known. She superimposes a perfect past onto the Russian desolation – a lovely child smiles, innocent of the ice behind her. Another child laughs, innocent of the bleak huts of her likely settlement (Figures 4.7i and 4.7ii). It is at this level of forced affect that Geka's redeployment dilutes the effectiveness of Lanzmann's documentary style.

The crossing to Siberia is recalled by ex-deportees as their first sight of poverty. One man, then a boy, recalls standing on the shoulders of an older boy, staring in horror at the landscape they entered. He remembers tradesmen joking that they would have a lot of work – unfortunately, they had no idea how much. They imagined setting up as tradesmen, whereas, says the man-once-boy, they had to build their own communities from scratch. These remarks may reflect actual memory, but they are also indicative of the accentuated rural–urban divide between Russia and Latvia. In Latvia, Russia is equated with poverty, such that a girl wearing long petticoats showing below her skirt 'Russian'-style looks 'déclassé'. This is not an accurate portrait of Russia in any objective sense, but it does indicate the deep-seated alienation that feeds back into these memories, between ethnic Russians and ethnic Latvians in Latvia itself (where 27 per cent of the population is Russian.) In *Childhood Land of Siberia*, for example, a man



Figures 4.7i and ii *Remember or Forget*, 2006.

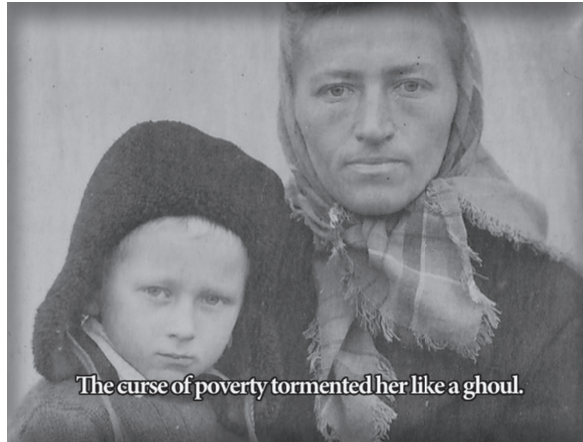
recalls his mother's transformation from a beautiful young woman in a thin dress to a warrior in harsh rags battling poverty in Siberia, and subsequently broken by the experience of being seen to be poor when she returned to Latvia. Before and after photographs illustrate her humiliation. As a Latvian she has golden curls. As a Siberian deportee she wears a headscarf and stares at the camera as at a prison wall (Figures 4.8i and 4.8ii). Her transformation is extreme, but her child is alive and beside her. She has triumphed in that.

Once in Siberia, the films shift their attention from the Latvian survivors to discovering the few Latvians left in the deportation districts. Both groups are often ill at ease, not entirely certain of the filmmakers' intentions. Many of the

(i)



(ii)



Figures 4.8i and ii A man recalls his mother's transformation. *Childhood Land of Siberia*, 2013.

ex-deportees are unable to converse in Latvian, and so they respond in Russian. Albeit gently, their loss of language is questioned, their lives with Russian/Tartar/Albanian wives or husbands are not celebrated, and they are left – often literally – standing behind a low fence or at a doorway or in a yard, reminded again of who they were and who they are not (Figure 4.9). It is as though their loss of identity must be confirmed and reiterated as a Siberian nightmare in order that Latvia can survive. This is, of course, the process by which an identity of victimhood is formed and sustained.

These aged faces are valued in the film as living examples of a wasted Latvian child, a lost Latvian voice. In *The Children of Siberia* Geka also interviews

Russians. Some remember the arrivals (from the Baltic States and from German regions of the period) and claim that the settlement was happy. One (drunk) interviewee lectures the interviewer on Latvia's continued reliance on Russia for its basic foodstuffs. A Siberian Russian woman describes a scene of random brutal murder of children, and the death through cold and exhaustion of their mothers (Figure 4.10).



Figure 4.9 Interviewed survivors are left standing behind their fences, reminded of who they were and who they are not. *Greetings from Siberia*, 2004.⁴²



Figure 4.10 *The Children of Siberia*, 2001.

Memorialization

The continued official Russian silence on the question of the deportations ensures that the Latvian nation remains dead or fatally wounded, at least in the minds of Russian politicians, and as such seriously threatens the sovereignty of the Latvian state. To that extent, the deportations continue to affect the selfhood of Latvians, which remains pre-sovereign and politically infantile in the Russian system of thought.⁴³ Another political rhetoric of childhood obscures historical analysis, perhaps. By implicitly disavowing the atrocity of the occupation and deportations, Russia also fails to acknowledge that a sovereign state and independent people inhabited Latvia's territory before the invasion, thus eliminating Latvia from their history books entirely. This silence is then doubled by the ignorance of the West, where little is known, or at least openly discussed, of the Baltic States' experience of the twentieth-century wars. This ignorance further exacerbates the meta-narrative of invisible suffering in the minds of the Latvian people. The West does not acknowledge the deportations of Latvian nationals to Siberia and the Russian Gulags as genocide. For Latvians, not to acknowledge the Soviet actions as genocide is not to recognize the crimes at all. Latvians feel that not only are they invisible as people, but that they are located in an invisible part of the world. Geka's films represent an attempt to find a voice for this subaltern past and the people connected to it. The films would lock the nation into a perpetually unfulfilled analysis of its abandonment and childish incapacity to be heard, and a compulsion to inherit the memories of their parents. Following Hirsch, Hannah Starman examines how Holocaust survivors transmit the trauma of genocide to their children through particular parenting strategies.⁴⁴ Geka likewise facilitates the transmission of the trauma experienced by those deported to new generations of Latvians. She does this not only through the repetition of her subject matter, but also through the pilgrimages that she organizes for descendants of deportees.

This is most evident in *Balance Sheet of Siberia* (2011), in which the key protagonist is Liveta Sprūde.⁴⁵ Liveta's grandfather, along with his wife and daughter, Liveta's mother, were deported because of his work building aircraft for the military. In *Balance Sheet of Siberia*, we see Liveta visiting the final resting place of her grandmother, Otilija Vitola, in Tolstiy Nos, a settlement village that no longer exists. All that remains are crumbling graves; the bones of those buried there clearly visible through the rotting wood (Figure 4.11).



Figure 4.11 *Balance Sheet of Siberia*, 2011.

After the memorial ceremony for her grandmother, Liveta tells the story of how she died. She speaks as though she had been there and seen her grandmother's last breath. This highlights how real these memories are for Liveta, as if they were lived experiences of her own. Then, just before she pushes the cross into the ground, she declares: 'God somehow brought me to this place, and now I do not want to leave it' (Figure 4.12). The place, Tolstiy Nos, is established as traumatic through the multiple shots of decaying graves and skeletal remains. Liveta's words suggest a desire to inflict suffering upon herself so as to be closer to those in her family who died during their exile. This is not her only pilgrimage to Siberia; she goes many times and appears in many of Geka's documentaries.

Similarly, the priest who travels with Geka's crew to perform religious ceremonies at the gravesites of lost family members encourages this continuity of suffering and also claims embodiment. 'If we could only get into a time machine and travel back to June 1941 in Latvia,' he proclaims before Liveta's grandmother's memorial service, 'then we could be sure that some, if not all of us would be next to them in the same place and time, and also in suffering and death.' The emphatic use of the words *if we could only* implies continuity and empathy, if not embodied identification. Is this meant to highlight that the pilgrims too want to be there with those who suffered, with the priest as chief sacrificial body, as though these Latvians are on a par with the body and wounds of the crucified Christ? That is certainly implied in the rhetoric of endless return to the place of death, articulating a level of desire to inflict

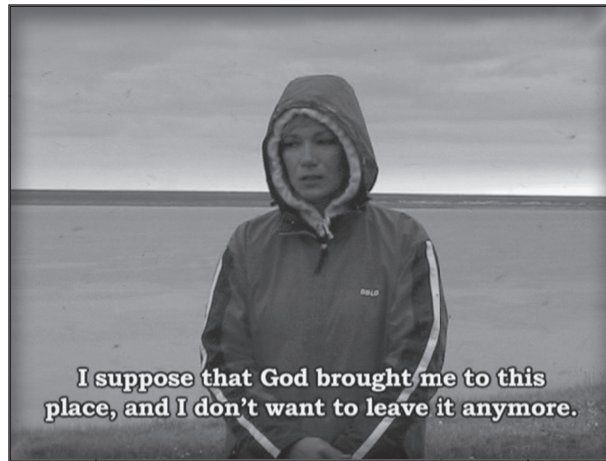


Figure 4.12 *Balance Sheet of Siberia*, 2011.

the trauma of the deportations upon oneself. It also indicates a philosophical gulf between Lanzmann, and those like him who describe the extermination and concentration camps of the European Holocaust as beyond historical description, and Geka's ethno-religious returns to sites with the flags and prayers of Latvia. The words of the priest also separate those 'who could be killed but not sacrificed', the *bare life* of despair, from these children who are now redefined as sacrificial for the future of Latvian selfhood.

Geka's *Children of Siberia* films both invoke and record an expression of intense physical closeness to the past. This is achieved through her memorialization practices as memory agent on behalf of Latvia and the filmed actions of those she records in their multiple returns to a family and a common site of childhood trauma. The separation between national subject, film protagonist and pro-filmic event is therefore minimal. It recalls the reliance on visual cinematic representation of modern subjectivity, and as such is a peculiarly twentieth-century approach to a reclamation of childhood and national consciousness.

Notes

- 1 The original research for this chapter was funded by the Australian Research Council. We thank anonymous readers as well as Child and Film Network colleagues for their assistance in shaping the paper.

- 2 Tony Judt, *Post-War: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), 645.
- 3 Valters Nollendorfs, Uldis Neiburgs, 'Briefing Paper 04: Soviet Mass Deportations from Latvia', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia*, 16 August 2004, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/policy/history/briefing-papers/briefing-paper4/> (accessed 10 January 2015).
- 4 Nollendorfs, Neiburgs, 'Briefing Paper 04'.
- 5 See, for example, the national research programme on Latvian identity. http://erawatch.jrc.ec.europa.eu/information/country_pages/lv/supportmeasure/support_0038.
- 6 <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Latvia.html#3> is one of a number of websites seeking a new historical approach. Meanwhile, the official account refuses to accept any widespread involvement, placing the blame of a few 'co-opted' individuals. <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/policy/information-on-the-history-of-latvia/briefing-papers-of-the-museum-of-the-occupation-of-latvia/the-holocaust-in-german-occupied-latvia>.
- 7 See Marianne Hirsch's discussion of the deployment of perpetrator images of the Warsaw Ghetto and their re-use by post-war artists and memorialists. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia, 2012), 212: 127 ff.
- 8 Eva-Clarita Onken, 'Memory and Democratic Pluralism in the Baltic States – Rethinking the Relationship', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 41, no. 3 (2010): 282.
- 9 Ilze Nāgela, 'Intervija ar kinorežisoru Dzintru Geku: Par filmēšanu, Sibīriju un dzīvi', *Laikraksts Latvietis*, 10 May 2012, <http://laikraksts.com/raksti/raksts.php?KursRaksts=2399> (accessed 14 July 2015).
- 10 Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 18. See, especially, the reference to Frieda Wolfinger, a survivor of the Riga Ghetto.
- 11 Hirsch, *The Generation of Post-Memory*, 205 ff.
- 12 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 54.
- 13 Valters Nollendorfs and Uldis Neiburgs, 'Briefing Paper 03: The Holocaust in German-Occupied Latvia', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia*, 16 August 2008, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/policy/information-on-the-history-of-latvia/briefing-papers-of-the-museum-of-the-occupation-of-latvia/the-holocaust-in-german-occupied-latvia> (accessed 14 November 2015).
- 14 This is now known as the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, recording visual testimonies of Holocaust survivors in Latvia. The project records testimonies of other genocide survivors (such as the Armenian genocide).

- Geka pursues her subsequent Latvian project so as to include Latvian experience in these larger narratives of genocide in Europe's early-twentieth-century history. Maruta Z. Vitols, 'Investigating the Past, Envisioning the Future: An exploration of post-1991 Latvian documentary', in *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas*, ed. Anikó Imre (Malden, Oxford, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 335.
- 15 This recognition is not borne out by contemporary data, which indicate that Latvia is now on the lower end of the scale for multiple foetuses in Europe. We have not found evidence of the changing patterns in birth rate from the 1930s, however. EURO-PERISTAT Project with SCPE and EUROCAT. European Perinatal Health Report. The health and care of pregnant women and babies in Europe in 2010. May 2013, see www.europeristat.com.
 - 16 Trains and train tracks are central images used to remember the Soviet deportations in many other eastern European cinemas, for example, *In the Crosswind* (Martti Helde, 2014). Undoubtedly, however *Shoah* sets the standard for understanding the train as a route to death, and recalling the inevitability of the destination. Much earlier *Night and Fog* (Resnais, 1955) did also reference trains but through the use of archival material and perpetrator footage.
 - 17 *The Children of Siberia*, DVD, directed by Dzintra Geka, (2001; Riga: SB Studio, 2001), Film.
 - 18 *Shoah*. DVD, directed by Claude Lanzmann (1985; New York: New Yorker Films, 2005), Film.
 - 19 Michael North, *The Baltic, A History* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 228 ff.
 - 20 Unsurprisingly, the history and motivations of this period are hotly contested by Latvians, especially Russian-speaking Latvian residents. We do not have the space here to do justice to the perspectives of all relevant arguments but note that Geka's stance is not the only approach to the period in cultural discourse in Latvia today. See North, *The Baltic*, 256 ff.
 - 21 North, *The Baltic*, 256.
 - 22 Inesis Feldmanis, Karlis Kangeris, 'The Volunteer SS Legion in Latvia', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia*, 13 February 2002, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/policy/information-on-the-history-of-latvia/the-volunteer-ss-legion-in-latvia> (accessed 4 August 2015).
 - 23 <http://defendinghistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Arajs-komando.jpg>.
 - 24 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 142.
 - 25 Māra Lazda, 'Women, Nation, and Survival: Latvian Women in Siberia 1941–1957', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 36, no. 1 (2005): 1.
 - 26 Mārtiņš Kaprāns, Olga Procevska and Laura Uzule, 'Persistence and Transformation of Cultural Trauma: Commemoration of Soviet Deportations in

- the Media of Post-Soviet Latvia (1987-2010)', in *Trauma Imprints: Performance, Art, Literature and Theoretical Practice*, ed. Catherine Barrette, Bridget Haylock and Danielle Mortimer (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2011), 245–52.
- 27 Veida Skultans, 'Looking for a Subject: Latvian Memory and Narrative', *History of the Human Sciences* 9, no. 4 (1996): 65–80.
- 28 The contemporary research landscape in Latvia is dominated by scholarly work on identity. The narratives identified through this research include: Latvia – the farming nation, Latvia – the singing nation, Latvia – the cosmopolitan centre of trade between East and West and Latvia – the nation of invisible victims.
- 29 Skultans, 'Looking for a Subject', 65.
- 30 Daniel Feierstein, *Genocide as Social practice: Re-organizing Society under the Nazis and Argentina's Military Junta* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 101ff, 209f.
- 31 Feierstein, *Genocide as Social Practice*, 113.
- 32 Kaprāns, Procevska and Uzule, 'Persistence and Transformation of Cultural Trauma', 7.
- 33 Dovile Budryte, 'Experiences of Collective Trauma and Political Activism: A Study of Women "Agents of Memory" in Post-Soviet Lithuania', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 41, no. 3 (2010): 331.
- 34 Kaprāns, Procevska and Uzule, 'Persistence and Transformation of Cultural Trauma', 2.
- 35 Lazda, 'Women, Nation, and Survival', 1.
- 36 Dzintra Geka, *Childhood Land of Siberia*, DVD, directed by Dzintra Geka (2013; Riga: SB Studio, 2013), Film.
- 37 Dzintra Geka, *Remember or Forget*, DVD, directed by Dzintra Geka (2006; Riga: SB Studio, 2006), Film.
- 38 Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 8.
- 39 Leon Wieseltier in, Garrath Williams, 'Dangerous Victims: On Some Political Dangers of Vicarious Claims to Victimhood', *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 2 (2008): 77.
- 40 Karl E. Jirgens, 'Fusions of Discourse: Postcolonial/Postmodern Horizons in Baltic Culture', in *Baltic Postcolonialism*, ed. Violeta Kelertas (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2006), 60.
- 41 Paula Rabinowitz, 'Wreckage upon Wreckage: History, Documentary and the Ruins of Memory', *History and Theory* 32, no. 2 (1993): 135.
- 42 Dzintra Geka, *Greetings from Siberia*, DVD, directed by Dzintra Geka (2004; Riga: SB Studio, 2004), Film.

- 43 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.
- 44 Laura Jeffrey and Matei Candea, 'The Politics of Victimhood', *History and Anthropology* 17, no. 4 (2006): 287–96.
- 45 Dzintra Geka, *Balance Sheet of Siberia*, DVD, directed by Dzintra Geka (2011; Riga: SB Studio, 2011), Film.